

The Romance of the Rose

Le Roman de la Rose was one of the most widely read works of French literature in the 14th century. It was begun by Guillaume de Lorris in 1225-30 as a witty allegory of the difficulties facing the young man in love. He stopped writing after completing 4000 lines. Between 1269 and 1278, Jean de Meun composed the remaining 17,000 lines. Chaucer, who shows no liking for allegory in his own writing, nonetheless knew it well and translated at least some parts of it. The section by Jean de Meun is often strongly antifeminist and the figure of the Old Woman (La Vieille) seems to be a vital source for the Wife of Bath. The Old Woman is a former courtesan who is responsible for guarding Bel Accueil (Fair Welcome) in his prison. The Lover needs him if he is to gain favorable welcome from the Lady and the Old Woman is an unreliable guard. In long speeches she urges Fair Welcome to adopt her own (very mercenary) attitude to life.

The Advice of the Old Woman (extracts from lines 12700 – 14500)

'Ah, Fair Welcome, I am extremely fond of you, for you are so handsome and worthy. My time for joy has all departed but yours is yet to come. I can scarcely stand upright any longer except with a stick or a crutch. You are still a child and do not know what you will do, but I know very well that sooner or later, whenever it may be, you will pass through the flame that burns everything, and plunge into the bath in which Venus makes women bathe. I know it well, you will feel the burning brand, and I advise you to listen to my instructions and prepare yourself before bathing there, for the young man who has no one to instruct him bathes there at his peril. But if you follow my advice you will come safe into port.

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'I was young and beautiful, silly and irresponsible, and I have never been to the school of Love, where they teach the theory, but I know it all through practice. **Experience, which I have pursued throughout my life, has made me wise** in love's ways (cf. Wife of Bath's Prologue, lines 1-2), and since I now know all about it, it is not right that I should fail to teach you what I know, the fruits of my own experience. It is good to advise the young. It is certainly not to be wondered at that you do not know the first thing about it, for you are young and green. 'But the fact remains that I persevered until in the end I obtained the knowledge, and I could even give a public lecture on it. Not everything that is very old is to be fled from or despised: sense and experience are to be found there. We have often encountered people who were left, in the end at least, with a fund of sense and experience, however dearly they had bought it. And when, not without great pain, I had obtained sense and experience, I deceived many a valiant man who had fallen captive into my toils; but I was deceived by many before I realized it.

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'Moreover, my sweet child, no one, unless he were very studious or had experienced great grief, could know or imagine the pain in my heart when I recalled to mind the fair speeches, sweet pleasures, sweet delights, sweet kisses, and most sweet embraces that had flown away so soon. Flown? Certainly, never to return!

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And yet, by God, the memory of my heyday still gives me pleasure, and when I think back to the gay life that my heart so desires, my thoughts are filled with delight and my limbs with new vigour. The thought and the recollection of it rejuvenates my whole body; it does me all the good in the world to remember everything that happened, for I have at least had my fun, however I may have been deceived (cf. WBP, lines 475-79).

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'Fair, gentle son, with your sweet, tender flesh, I would like to teach you the games of love, so that when you have learned them, you will not be deceived. Shape yourself according to my art, for no one who is not well informed will be able to get through without some loss. Now make sure you listen and pay attention and commit everything to memory, for I know all about it. (. . .) It is good to frequent rich men if their hearts are not mean and miserly and if you are skilled at fleecing them. Fair Welcome may attract as many of them as he likes, provided he gives each to understand that he would not take any other lover for a thousand marks in fine powdered gold, and provided he swears that, had he been willing to allow his rose, which is most sought after, to be taken by another, he would have been loaded with gold and jewels, but that his heart is so true and faithful that no one will stretch out his hand for the rose except him alone (cf. WBP, lines 449-55) who is extending his hand at that moment.

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'It is true, I assure you, that the lord of the fair must collect his toll from everyone, and if you fail at one mill, hey up to the next as fast as you can! **The mouse who has only one hole to retreat to has a very poor refuge and is in great danger when he goes foraging (cf. WBP, lines 578-80).** It is just the same for a woman, for she is mistress of all the bargaining in which men engage in order to have her; she ought to take from everyone, since on mature reflection she would see that it was a very foolish idea to have only one lover.

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'In short, **[men] are all deceitful traitors, ready to indulge their lusts with everyone, and we should deceive them in our turn and not set our hearts upon just one of them. It is a foolish woman who gives her heart in this way: she ought to have several lovers and arrange, if she can, to be so pleasing that she brings great suffering upon all of them.** If she has no graces, let her acquire them and always behave more cruelly towards those who will strive all the harder to serve her in order to win her love, while exerting herself to welcome those who do not care about it (cf. WBP, lines 215-20). She should be familiar with games and songs, but avoid quarrels and strife. If she is not beautiful, she should enhance her appearance. (...) If her neck and throat are fair and white, let her see to it that her dressmaker cuts the neck so low that half a foot of fine white flesh is visible front and back. (...) And if her breasts are too full, let her take a kerchief or scarf and wrap it round her ribs to bind her bosom, and then fasten it with a stitch or knot; she will then be able to disport herself. (...) There is also a proper way to weep, but every woman has the skill to weep properly wherever she may be. Even when no one has caused them any trouble or shame or annoyance, they still have tears at the ready: they all weep in whatever they like, and make a habit of it. But no man should be moved by it, not if he sees the tears flowing as fast as rain, for a woman only sheds such tears and suffers such sorrow and affliction in order to make a fool of him.

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'She ought also to behave properly at table. . . . She must be very careful not to dip her fingers in the sauce up to the knuckles, nor to smear her lips with soup or garlic or fat meat, nor to take too many pieces or too large a piece and put them in her mouth. She must hold the morsel with the tips of her fingers and dip it into the sauce, whether it be thick, thin, or clear, then convey the mouthful with care, so that no drop of soup or sauce or pepper falls on to her chest. When drinking, she should exercise such care that not a drop is spilled upon her, for anyone who saw that happen might think her very rude and coarse. And she must be sure never to touch her goblet when there is anything in her mouth. Let her wipe her mouth so clean that no grease is allowed to remain upon it, at least not upon her upper lip, for when grease is left on the upper lip, globules appear in the wine, which is neither pretty nor nice (cf. General Prologue, lines 127-36). (...) She should take care not to get drunk, for no drunken man or woman can keep anything secret, and when a woman is drunk she has no defences (cf. WBP, line 473) but blurts out whatever she thinks; she is at everyone's mercy when she allows such a misfortune to overtake her.

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'A woman must be careful not to lead too cloistered a life, for the more she stays at home, the less she is seen by everyone and the less her beauty is known, desired, and sought after. **She ought often to go to the principal church and attend weddings, processions, games, festivals, and dances (cf. WBP, lines 561-64),** for it is in such places that the God and Goddess of Love hold their classes and sing Mass to their disciples. (...) Moreover, women are born free; the law has bound them by taking away from them the freedoms Nature had given them. For Nature, if we apply our minds to the question, is not so stupid as to create Marote simply for Robichon, nor Robichon for Mariete or for Agnes or for Perrete; on the contrary, fair son, you may be sure that she has made all women for all men and all men for all women, every woman common to every man and every man to every woman. Thus when, in order to prevent dissolute conduct, quarrelling, and killing, and to facilitate the rearing of children, which is their joint responsibility, these ladies and maidens are affianced, taken, and married by law, they still try in every way they can, and whether they be ugly or fair, to regain their freedom.

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'When a bird from the green woodland is taken and put in a cage, where he is most carefully and delicately cared for, and sings for the rest of his life with a joyful heart, or so you think, he still longs for the leafy wood which it was his nature to love, and would like to be in the trees, however well fed he may be. It is his constant thought and endeavour to recover his freedom; he tramples his food underfoot in the eagerness which fills his heart, and goes up and down his cage, hunting and searching in great distress for a window or opening through which he might fly away to the wood. In the same way, I assure you, all women whether maidens or ladies and whatever their origin, are naturally disposed to search willingly for ways and paths by which they might achieve freedom, for they would always like to have it.

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'Upon my soul, if I had been wise, I could have been a very rich woman, for great men courted me when I was pretty and charming, and I had some of them firmly in my toils. But by the faith I owe God and Saint Thibaut, when I had taken from them, **I gave away everything to a scoundrel who put me to great shame but whom I loved the best. I addressed all the others as lovers, but he was the only one I loved, although I assure you that he cared not a fig for me, and said so. He was a bad man — I never saw a worse one — and he had nothing but contempt for me, calling me a common whore; scoundrel that he was, he never loved me. Women have very poor judgement, and I was a true woman. I never loved a man who loved me, but if this wretch had hurt my shoulder or cracked my skull, I tell you I would have thanked him for it. However much he beat me, I would still have had him fall upon me, for he was so good at making peace, whatever hurt he might have done me (cf. WBP, lines 509-20).** However badly he treated me, beating me and dragging me about, hurting my face and bruising it, he would always beg my forgiveness before he left. However humiliating his language to me, he would always sue for peace and then take me to bed, and so there was peace and harmony between us once more. And so he had me on the end of a rope, the false, thieving traitor, because he was so good in bed. I could not have lived without him and I would willingly have followed him everywhere. If he had run away, I would have gone in search of him as far as London in England, such was my love and affection for him. He put me to shame and I him, for he used the fine gifts I gave him to lead a riotous life; he never saved anything, but spent it all dicing in the taverns. He never learned another trade, nor did he need to, since I gave him so much to spend and money was mine for the taking. Everyone paid me, and he was happy to spend it, and always on debaucheries, for depraved desires inflamed him. His mouth was so tender that he would not try to do anything worthwhile, and had no fondness for any kind of life except one of pleasure and idleness. In the end, as I saw, he got into a very bad way, for he became poor and had to beg for bread, while I had not money enough for two carding-combs, nor had I married a lord. And so, as I told you, I was reduced to want and came here through these thickets. Fair son, let my condition be an example to you, and remember it. Behave sensibly, so that you will be the better for my knowledge, for when your rose is withered and white hairs assail you, then you will surely feel the lack of gifts.'